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Turin, Einaudi, 2007, viii + 419 p.

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Sergio Luzzatto, Padre Pio. Miracoli e politica nell'Italia del Novecento

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1 The cult of Padre Pio has engulfed the Catholic Church: in Italy, according to Sergio Luzzatto, more people pray to Padre Pio than to the Virgin, to any saint, or indeed to the very figure of Jesus Christ, and it has spread throughout Europe and the Americas. Padre Pio prayer groups constitute a worldwide devotional movement; the impoverished hamlet of San Giovanni Rotondo, on the plateau of the Gargano peninsula in Puglia, to whose minuscule convent the young Capuchin was sent during the First Word War, has become a thriving pilgrimage destination, on a par with Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela and the unrecognized but very popular Bosnian shrine of Medjugorje, and has recently seen the completion of an overbearing Renzo Piano church to accommodate the large numbers of pilgrims. This is big business, and also, as Luzatto tells us in delicious detail, big politics.

2 The story goes back to Pio's stigmata, whose receipt is dated 20 September 1918, when he was aged 31. For decades thereafter the hierarchy, including several Popes, were troubled by the story, by the mass devotion it inspired, and by the accompanying unsavoury rumours: John XXIII called him an *idolo di stoppa*–a straw idol. But in Southern Italy Pio's miraculous powers were not in doubt, including the ability to heal even people he had never seen, and double presence. Such supernatural claims are not unusual, but very occasionally, as at Lourdes and Fatima, a story catches on and a person and a locality of no character at all become a subject of veneration and a pilgrimage site. In fact, the less character the better. This is what needs explanation, and this is why John Paul II promoted Pio's canonization process, which eventually culminated in 2002, only 34 years after his death.

3 Pio's stigmata date from a time when Italy was in a desperate state: in World War I the country suffered 600,000 dead and 950,000 wounded and, despite being–eventually–on the "winning side", it had suffered the humiliating defeat by German and Austrian armies at

Caporetto in 1917. The cause of the veterans, who roamed the country in rags and on crutches, was espoused–or exploited–by the extreme right and eventually by Mussolini. D'Annunzio spoke of the country's "passion" on the model of that of Christ and the leader of the veterans described Mussolini himself as having received the "stigmata of his own Passion". Curzio Malaparte, another febrile imagination of dubious taste, wrote in 1923 of Italy's need for a new Christ, a miracle-maker, charismatic, bearded and peasant-like (like Pio), who would lead the soldier-peasants against the citadels of humanism and liberalism.

4 Luzzatto mobilizes these writings and Mussolini's oratory in support of the idea that the moment of someone like Padre Pio had come. He evokes an affinity, though not a direct link, between Christian *martirologio* and that of the fascist *squadri*, as part of what he calls the *alchimia clerico-fascista*. He then tracks the alchemy in the Gargano peninsula itself, starting with a massacre of a socialist demonstration in 1920, continuing with dubious figures who navigated between the circle of Padre Pio devotees and the underworld of fascist politics, culminating in the neo-fascism of the 1970s. The most extraordinary of these is a confidence trickster and spy named–inter alia–Emanuele Brunatto, who typifies the borderline personality one often finds in the vicinity of cult figures: a serial bankrupt and onetime publisher to the fascist movement, he persuaded mostly wealthy and female Pio devotees to invest in a doomed locomotive project; as a spy in Paris he bought off enough Radical party deputies to turn a vote in support of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia; and he then stayed on in Paris, conducting a very profitable black market trade supplying the SS in the notorious Hotel Majestic, later channeling some of the profits towards Padre Pio's vast hospital project in San Giovanni. After the war, he was tried as a collaborator, sentenced to death in 1948 but eventually amnestied in 1953. Generous funding for the hospital, which is indeed a vast and successful project, also came from the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and its successor in Italian reconstruction, the United States relief agency AUSA. The head of both, Robert Jackson, would later marry the journalist and economist Barbara Ward, whose photo to this day hangs in the convent as a prominent devotee. US funding of the hospital was out of all proportion to its other funding in Southern Italy, because it fitted the US government's strenuous postwar support of the Christian Democrats against the Communists, who were strong in Puglia.

5 When this book appeared last November it created a small scandal in the Italian press. The focus was on a couple of handwritten notes found in the Vatican archives, in which Padre Pio had asked a young, inevitably female, devotee to go to the nearby town of Foggia and buy some carbolic acid, and to keep the strictest secrecy. (The pharmacist did not like it and went to the Bishop.) Earlier in his career he copied letters from the purportedly stigmatized Gemma of Lucca and presented them to his mentor as his own ecstatic experiences. But such revelations do nothing to diminish a cult and indeed the author, a distinguished historian of fascism, seems unwilling to overplay this potentially scandalous information.

6 Saints tend to be individuals who are ordinary in the extreme, save in one crucial respect– an act of heroic charity, death by martyrdom, the gift of healing and so on; and the same goes for Padre Pio. He was a model cleric and perfectly ordinary save in this one characteristic that had received the stigmata: this made him accessible, because of his ordinariness, but also mysterious. (Although innumerable healings have been attributed to him he did not make the slightest gesture to encourage such ideas.) The church

authorities, despite their misgivings, never discredited the stigmata, and indeed some bishops capitalized on them and eventually Paul VI and John Paul II both recognized their authenticity, so once they had received credence in the surrounding region, the fascination with Pio's persona acquired epidemic proportions. Respectable people testified to miraculous deeds such as healing and bipresence.

7 Pio's genius was as manager of his own persona and of his own ordinariness. Despite controversies, inspections and inquiries, his discretion was absolute–thus of course adding to the aura of mystery. The thousands of letters and homilies which have been published are innocuous exercises in moral exhortation and devotional improvement. He had the good sense to distance himself from some of the more outrageous things done and said in his name, and never for a moment questioned ecclesiastical authority. Scenes of disorder would precede his celebration of the eucharist as devotees and pilgrims rushed to get a front-row pew, but he remained serene. The Vatican never dared move against him, however scandalous the devotions, for fear of provoking disorders or worse, and instead the time-honoured method of co-optation was chosen.

8 Luzzatto seems to see Padre Pio himself as a victim–presumably not entirely innocent–both of a suspicious hierarchy and of the uncontrollable enthusiasm surrounding his person, so that there emerges a certain sympathy for the saint himself. This can be seen in the confrontation with the Bishop sent to interrogate and inquire in 1919, described as the most dramatic moment of Pio's life after the stigmata themselves, when, laying his gloved hand on the Bible, he had to say whether his wounds were "artificial, divine or some sort of a fraud". The Curia's subsequent decision to remove him remained of course a dead letter. A similar sequence was repeated in the 1960s. In the late 1960s, as the friar's health declined, it was said that his wounds were healing, so that when he died in 1968 they had disappeared completely. The Convent authority nevertheless decided that the gloves should remain on the embalmed body as the masses came to pay their respects–to avoid "fallacious and hasty interpretations" and so as not to "scandalize the weak".